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ABSTRACT

This digest summarizes the literature on principles of changing behaviors in students with behavior disorders. Principles include: (1) focus on behaviors that need to be changed; (2) identify new behaviors to be developed; (3) provide opportunities to practice new behaviors; (4) treat social skills deficits as errors in learning; (5) teach students to take responsibility for their own learning; and (6) focus on functional skills that will have broad applications. (Contains 10 references or other resources.) (DB)

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Behavioral Disorders: Focus on Change

Focus on Behaviors That Need to Be Changed

Students who are referred to as having "conduct disorders" and students who are referred to as having "emotional disabilities," "behavioral disorders," "serious emotional disturbances," or "emotional and behavioral disorders" have two common elements that are instructionally relevant: (1) they demonstrate behavior that is noticeably different from that expected in school or the community and (2) they are in need of remediation.

In each instance, the student is exhibiting some form of behavior that is judged to be different from that which is expected in the classroom. The best way to approach a student with a "conduct disorder" and a student with a "behavioral disorder" is to operationally define exactly what it is that each student does that is discrepant with the expected standard. Once it has been expressed in terms of behaviors that can be directly observed, the task of remediation becomes clearer. A student's verbally abusive behavior can be addressed, whereas it is difficult to directly identify or remediate a student's "conduct disorder," since that term may refer to a variety of behaviors of widely different magnitudes. The most effective and efficient approach is to pinpoint the specific behavioral problem and apply data-based instruction to remediate it. (Lewis, Heflin, & DiGangi, 1991, p.9)

Identify New Behaviors to Be Developed

Two questions need to be addressed in developing any behavior change procedure regardless of the student's current behavioral difficulty: "What do I want the student to do instead?" and "What is the most effective and efficient means to help the student reach his or her goals?" Regardless of whether the student is withdrawn or aggressive, the objective is to exhibit a response instead of the current behavior. We may want the student to play with peers on the playground instead of playing alone. We may want the student to play appropriately with peers on the playground instead of hitting peers during games. For both behavior patterns, we have identified what we want them to do instead of the current problem behavior.
(Lewis, Heflin, & DiGangi, 1991, p.14)

Using effective teaching strategies will promote student academic and social behavioral success. Teachers should avoid focusing on students' inappropriate behavior and, instead, focus on desirable replacement behaviors. Focusing behavior management systems on positive, prosocial replacement responses will provide students with the opportunity to practice and be reinforced for appropriate behaviors. Above all else, have fun with students! Humor in the classroom lets students view school and learning as fun. Humor can also be used to avoid escalating behaviors by removing the negative focus from the problem.
(Lewis, Heflin, & DiGangi, 1991, p.26)

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Provide Opportunities to Practice New Behaviors

If we expect students to learn appropriate social skills we must structure the learning environment so that these skills can be addressed and practiced. We need to increase the opportunity for students to interact within the school environment so that prosocial skills can be learned. If all a student does is perform as a passive participant in the classroom, then little growth in social skill acquisition can be expected. Just as students improve in reading when they are given the opportunity to read, they get better at interacting when given the opportunity to initiate or respond to others' interactions.

It is necessary to target specific prosocial behaviors for appropriate instruction and assessment to occur. Prosocial behavior includes such things as

- Taking turns, working with partner, following directions.
- Working in group or with others.
- Displaying appropriate behavior toward peers and adults.
- Increasing positive relationships.
- Demonstrating positive verbal and nonverbal relationships.
- Showing interest and caring.
- Settling conflicts without fighting.
- Displaying appropriate affect.

(Algozzine, Ruhl, & Ramsey, 1991, pp. 22-23)

Treat Social Skills Deficits As Errors in Learning

Social skills deficits or problems can be viewed as errors in learning; therefore, the appropriate skills need to be taught directly and actively. It is important to base all social skill instructional decisions on individual student needs. In developing a social skill curriculum it is important to follow a systematic behavior change plan.

During assessment of a student's present level of functioning, two factors should be addressed. First, the teacher must determine whether the social skill problem is due to a *skill deficit* or a *performance deficit*. The teacher can test the student by directly asking what he or she would do or can have the student role play responses in several social situations (e.g., "A peer on the bus calls you a name. What should you do?").

- If the student can give the correct response but does not display the behavior outside the testing situation, the social skill problem is probably due to a *performance deficit*.
- If the student cannot produce the socially correct response, the social skill problem may be due to a *skill deficit*.

More direct instruction may be required to overcome the skill deficits, while a performance deficit may simply require increasing positive contingencies to increase the rate of displaying the

appropriate social response. During assessment, it is important to identify critical skill areas in which the student is having problems.

Once assessment is complete, the student should be provided with direct social skill instruction. At this point, the teacher has the option of using a prepared social skill curriculum or developing one independently. It is important to remember that since no single published curriculum will meet the needs of all students, it should be supplemented with teacher-developed or teacher-modified lessons.

Social skill lessons are best implemented in groups of 3 to 5 students and optimally should include socially competent peers to serve as models. The first social skill group lesson should focus on three things: (1) an explanation of why the group is meeting, (2) a definition of what social skills are, and (3) an explanation of what is expected of each student during the group. It may also be helpful to implement behavior management procedures for the group (i.e., contingencies for compliance and non-compliance).

It is important to prompt the students to use newly learned skills throughout the day and across settings to promote maintenance and generalization. It is also important to reinforce the students when they use new skills.

(Lewis, Heflin, & DiGangi, 1991, pp.17-18)

Teach Students to Take Responsibility for Their Own Learning

Often overlooked is the need to increase student independence in learning. Students with BD may be particularly uninvolved in their learning due to problems with self-concept, lack of a feeling of belonging to the school, and repeated failures in school. Instructional strategies involving self-control, self-reinforcement, self-monitoring, self-management, problem solving, cognitive behavior modification, and metacognitive skills focus primarily on teaching students the skills necessary for taking responsibility and showing initiative in making decisions regarding their own instruction. These strategies, typically used in combination or in a "package format" that incorporates extrinsic reinforcement, have shown promise for enhancing student learning and independence.

(Gable, Laycock, Maroney, & Smith, 1991, p.24)

Focus on Functional Skills That Will Have Broad Applications

Essential in a curriculum for students with behavioral problems are skills that can directly improve the ultimate functioning of the student and the quality of his or her life. The concept of functional skills is not limited to the areas of self-help or community mobility, but also include skills such as those required to seek and access assistance, be life-long independent learners, respond to changes in the environment, succeed in employment, be adequately functioning adults and parents, and achieve satisfying and productive lives. The concepts of the functional curriculum approach, the criterion of ultimate functioning, and participation to the highest degree possible in life must be extended to students with BD, many of whom will otherwise fail to fulfill their potential. (Gable, Laycock, Maroney, & Smith, 1991, p.28)

References

This digest was developed from selected portions of three 1991 ERIC publications listed below. These books are part of a nine-book series, *Working with Behavioral Disorders*. Stock No. P346.

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